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A TRULY DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL PAPER

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The criterion of success in any high-school activity is the measure in which that activity trains the student in intelligent, unselfish co-operation in community affairs. Unless that motive be constantly held before teachers and leaders, extra-class activities may very easily fall far short of this ideal.

For example, a dramatic club in which a few clever and talented people constantly perform for the entertainment of the rest may be a very edifying spectacle. It may give to the casual observer a much more brilliant impression of the school; it makes the path of the faculty adviser much smoother; and it certainly does train the student body as a whole for just exactly the condition now prevalent in this country, in which the great mass of people have no apparent responsibility except to watch a performance—sometimes with sneers and sometimes with applause, but rarely with any sense of individual responsibility.

This truth is perhaps less apparent when applied to a school paper, but it may be seen upon analysis that it is even more essential that the student body should not only take an immediate and individual interest in the weekly or daily publication, but also bear an immediate and individual responsibility for its standards.

Neither is this an impossibility, though it may so appear at first glance. And certainly if there is any one feature of American life today in which every citizen should be interested and about which every citizen should be informed, it is the newspapers. The part which they play in setting standards, in forming opinions, and even in creating ideals makes them perhaps the leading direct influence upon modern life. If, then, the school can do anything to train the next generation so that the individual citizens comprising it may have, not only some definite standards of what a newspaper ought to be, and what service it ought to render a

community, but also some real understanding of the problems confronting the management, then we may expect in the future clear constructive criticism instead of tolerance or indifference. What that would mean in higher community ideals is evident.

When the *Senn News*, a weekly, was founded in 1916, it was the intention of the English department that it should be the voice of the student body. More and more, however, as the staff and the faculty advisers came to understand the specialized form of writing required, did they see the difficulties in the way of making a newspaper the expression of the individuals in the school community, although they still firmly believed in that as an ideal. The staff has always been chosen either by competitive examination or by promotion, so that it is in a sense democratic. So also is it representative of as large a body of interests as possible; it has always aimed to give every department and every activity sufficient space so that the whole school might know everything that was going on in its various parts, in itself no mean democratizing influence in a school of 2,600. The paper is read by the students in a large majority, for it is supported entirely by its weekly sales, "its page not being marred by advertisements," as a proud student expressed it.

Yet in spite of all this, the advisers recognized last spring (1919) a steady movement toward a greater specialization, as the staff grew in technical knowledge of journalistic style and in ambition to be "like a real newspaper." (I speak of the staff as if it were a permanent body. This of course is not possible in any school activity, but a certain permanency of ideals has been possible through the aforementioned system of promotions.) Several attempts to check this tendency failed, either because of poor management, or because they were plans made and imposed by teachers, rather than the expression of any real desire on the part of the students. In September, 1919, the opening of a class in journalism seemed to be one more step toward narrowing, rather than broadening, community responsibility, valuable though such a class is in the modern high school.

Meanwhile the English department had given its approval to an idea, as yet too inchoate to be termed a plan, rather indefinitely

stated as an intention to use *News* writing to motivate composition in all years. Just how that was to be accomplished was not clear, either to the department or *News* advisers, but all were firmly of an opinion that it must somehow be done through the English classes. Some unorganized attempts along this line late in the semester brought a few really good editorials written by first-year pupils, but little else.

I started to work out the idea in two classes of third-year composition, the bugbear of the English course. Students approach this semester with an attitude of bored resignation. It has the reputation of being a stiff one, and is admittedly the semester when we hold students for technique. Consequently I expected to find appreciation of any change of plan, but was totally unprepared for the wave of enthusiasm which rushed over the class at the suggestion that we write for the *News*. Actually, there was not a dull minute through the semester for either students or teacher. In fact, the latter was very busy all the time trying to keep ahead of the class. It was necessary also to keep constantly in mind the fact that the semester must teach, not only some elementary knowledge of journalistic writing and of the standards and responsibilities of anyone who writes for the public through the printed page, but also the old requirements of the rhetoric course, accurate punctuation, clear, definite sentence structure, at least a *speaking* acquaintance (exquisite irony!) with such things as colloquialisms, barbarisms, and slang.

For the first week little was done except to study the daily newspapers, first from Chicago, and then from all over the world. We observed and compared the general composition of the first page (use of banner, spread, box, headlines, etc.), the arrangement and order of other pages, the general journalistic policy upon such matters as truth telling, sensationalism, and accuracy, and the editorial policy of at least one paper regularly read. References were also made to a very good list of books in our library. By the end of the second week we had discovered for ourselves the various kinds of "stories" listed in Bleyer's *Types*, had some idea of the principles governing the composition of the pages, and had begun to recognize the essential differences in style between, for

instance, an editorial and a feature story. We had seen also that the newspaper man had a wide range of vocabulary, exact diction, power of clear narrative and vivid description. We found that he invariably wrote clear sentences and used correct grammar and punctuation.

In that two weeks, then, the motive for the semester's work came into being in the class consciousness. From that time on, they worked as a unit. Assignments in the rhetoric text, chapters of theory, exercises in coherence devices, dry practice in writing sentences, all went with a will. There was some reason in asking a football man to work out tedious sentences if it would help him write a telling editorial later on urging attendance at games. In other words, the theoretical and drill lessons took their true places as practice in using tools which were later to give invaluable service.

However, this is getting ahead of the story, for the theory was not given all at once. Rather it was worked out in this wise. We studied editorials first, in the newspapers and textbooks. (Is it human nature to find it easier to preach and appeal than to observe and describe?) Then we read aloud in class the very best editorials we could find in the papers of a certain date, discussed the reasons why those selected were superior to those rejected, and made lists of appropriate subjects for *Senn News* editorials. Then we wrote editorials suitable for the next issue, read and discussed them in class, and finally copied them for the teacher's correction. During this discussion there came out for the first time what I had not theorized upon, because I had wanted them to learn it from actual experience—the idea of the powerful influence wielded by the editor through every sentence that appeared in his paper.

In repeating the course, I have begun with news and feature stories, the better to impress the fact that first and second person must not be used, and that comment and appeal belong only in the editorial, which I intend to teach last.

The types worked out according to this general method were the informational news story, including the report of an assembly, game, or club meeting; the feature or human-interest story; the interview; the lecture report; the humor column; and the editorial.

One very interesting piece of work was done in the development of the interview. After having selected, studied, and read in class examples from the dailies, the students noted the various methods of handling the report, observed the punctuation, imagined the questions asked by the reporter and his attitude toward his "victim." Since *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is part of that semester's work, we discussed Bartley's methods of interviewing Silas. We also studied an interview with the superintendent of schools recently published in the *Senn News*. The assignment then given was to interview some person on any subject of interest to him, and to write up the results for class. Possible subjects and methods of approach were suggested. These were perhaps the most interesting papers of the semester. One boy reported the opinions of his father, a railroad official, on pending legislation; another could not get his father to take him seriously at all, and wrote a humorous report of what was not said; another interviewed an insurance man so deftly that he did not recognize it as an interview until he was accidentally enlightened some weeks later. One girl related the opinions of a really famous movie actress, who was her neighbor, about the stars with whom she works; another reported her mother's attitude toward the six months' stretch of loneliness every year, imposed upon her by the fact that her husband is an importer.

In working out the feature story we found it advisable to build a model in class, one student at the board writing down those of the suggested sentences which met class approval. In this way we realized more clearly the great variety of possibilities in that type and the necessity of holding to the atmosphere suggested in the first sentence. For example, a boy well known to the class stopped a runaway milk wagon one morning on the way to school, just as we were ready for feature stories. We never had any dearth of subjects; in fact we were even embarrassed by the richness of our choice, a rare predicament in composition. We talked over that subject in class and tried three leads, a "Skinny Yo Ho!" call, an exaggerated burlesque on the children saved from premature starvation, and announcement of a new school hero. We worked out all three far enough to see their possibilities, selected the last, carried it as far as we could in class, and then appointed

a committee to finish it according to specifications. It appeared in the next *News*. The class meanwhile had decided to keep it a complete secret from the hero and did it, too, for four days, thirty-five of them. Then they all gathered around to watch him read it (it was a front-page story) and later wrote another feature story on their ability to keep a secret.

Throughout this time three essentials were constantly emphasized. First, every paper must be read and discussed in class in order that a class standard of good writing should be formed, that everyone should learn to think always of the possible effect of every article upon the school, should it be published, and that the whole class might become acquainted with the ability of each individual. Second, every article written must be on a Senn subject, in order to increase observation and knowledge of the school. Third, every energy should be bent toward getting our material accepted by the *News* staff for publication.

As evidence of success in the latter, each class kept a "string" pasted on the board in such a way that it was evident at a glance which class was leading. A committee from each class did the pasting during the first five minutes of the Thursday period (publication day). If anyone thinks that Juniors are too grown up to enjoy a contest of that sort, let him try it. The jubilation over an article considered by the staff important enough for a double-decked headline was only surpassed by the almost solemn elation of the day when one of our articles was bannered.

This led up to the climax of the semester's work, the publication of one complete issue by each class. In preparation we made plans in detail, outlining every day's work for two weeks before the eventful day of publication. The regular staff gave us talks on details of the system. Each class resolved itself into a staff of reporters and elected an editor-in-chief, two associates, a sports editor, a managing editor, a humor editor, and various assistants. The classes also chose an advertising committee composed of people with poster-making ability, and sold their own paper, although the regular business staff took charge of the sale as usual. The regular managing editor instructed the class editor on his methods of assigning work and checking up results, and gave him the list of permanent activities. Because it would give him some idea of the

difficulties to be met, the editor-in-chief of each class watched the regular staff make one "dummy," although that task was not to be attempted by the classes.

Ten days before time for the paper, the class interested began writing the humor columns. Every student wrote at least one item and the best were selected by general vote, with the final decision by the editor. Then each wrote an editorial and those to be published were selected in the same way, with a view, not only to quality, but to the space to be filled, and the appearance of the column. News and feature articles were assigned to individuals by the class managing editors, who took all responsibility for getting the material in on time, and after it was all over gave me a complete list of all work done by every student, from which were made my records for the two weeks. One thing was insisted upon—that every student be represented in the issue by at least one article besides his item of humor and his chance at an editorial. During the last two or three days emergency assignments were written by groups or committees working at once in different parts of the room, while the teacher moved from group to group offering help. Of course these recitation periods were necessarily most informal, but it must be borne in mind that the students were steadied by carrying all the responsibility. On the day when the "dummy" was in the making, the regular editor brought it to the classroom and announced the size of the headlines, and every student, previously instructed in the method of counting units, made the headline for his own article.

These two issues of the paper were among the best sellers of the semester. The school showed its approval of this method of production by buying four hundred more copies than usual. Immediately there was a wild clamor from other third-year classes. Everyone, with preparation or without, wanted to publish a *News*. Of course that was impossible; but any class can do it, whether the teacher has had journalistic training or not, if she will read a little, think a little more, co-operate closely with the faculty adviser, and inspire the class with a desire to do something for the school.

Each semester since, there have been classes working out the same plan, although not in exactly the same way. A trip to the shop where the *News* is printed and talks by reporters and editorial

writers from downtown papers have been new features, aside from those already indicated.

A bulletin is in the hands of the teachers in the Senn English department giving the history of the project and suggesting that those who do not wish to try the whole plan may at least write the humor column and the editorials, or learn to write at least one type of story. It is the hope of the *News* faculty advisers that, as time goes on, every composition class in school will be scheduled to handle either the editorials or the humor column, or both, in at least one issue, and that other classes may be ambitious enough to write short news articles. Then, as the supervision of the paper passes to other English teachers, and more and more of them not only become interested, but have actual experience, it is our dream that all of the composition classes may be writing for the *News* until the staff of the paper becomes a supervisory and inspirational body, with the whole school as its reporting staff. Then the responsibility will be where it belongs and we shall be training our future generations in true citizenship.

The teacher in this project knows from her figures that there was the smallest percentage in her experience of failure to hand in required papers; that nearly three times as many themes were written as are required by the department minimum, not only with no sense of strain on their part or hers, but with actual pleasure; that, later on, the best semester themes (long expositions) in her experience were worked out as a class exercise from original sources. But what the young people concerned say about it is more important. They are still conscious of that spirit of active co-operation. They had definite training in working toward a common goal under self-appointed leaders. They were made intelligent readers of daily papers, in itself no mean accomplishment. There grew up within them a spirit of absolute loyalty to all school activities and an understanding of their interdependence. Perhaps most essential of all, since we count our chief aim the training of citizens, there developed a sense of the great importance of the printed page, of its momentous power—the possibilities of hindering or furthering the progress of a great body by the spirit expressed in the smallest printed article.